DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 591 UD 032 443

TITLE	Meeting the Challenge of Low-Performing Schools. Policy Brief.
INSTITUTION	Public School Forum of North Carolina, Raleigh.
PUB DATE	1998-03-00
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Public School Forum of North Carolina, 3739 National Drive, Suite 210, Raleigh, NC 27612.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Change; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Intervention; *Low Achievement; Resource Allocation; School District Autonomy; State Legislation; State Programs; *State School District Relationship; Teacher Recruitment; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*North Carolina; Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

One of the consequences of the North Carolina ABC plan of educational reform has been the unmasking of student performance data. The new ABC model reports student performance data by school building, making it impossible to ignore the gap between students in high-performing schools and those in low-performing schools. Included in the legislation for the ABC plan was an intervention, or assistance, model, which calls for intervention teams in the state's lowest performing schools and allows for the removal of the principal. Now that the state has some experience in the intervention area, it has become clear that mandating consequences is one thing, and solving the problem of low-performing schools is another. In considering the complex issues related to low-performing schools, four things emerge as critical to success or failure of state-driven interventions: (1) the philosophy and roles of intervention teams; (2) the use of, or need for, additional resources; (3) the challenge of attracting and retaining competent teachers in low-performing schools; and (4) the need to go beyond traditional responses. In North Carolina, the question is how the state can become a full partner in school improvement. Most of the state's 122 low-performing schools are confronting issues related to poverty, inadequate parental support, and difficulties in attracting and retaining top quality teachers. The challenge is to find policy responses that make it possible for these schools to meet today's new demands. (SLD)

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the FORUM

POLICY brief

MARCH 1998

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An in-depth examination of issues related to low-performing schools. Prepared for participants in the NC Institute for Educational Policymakers, which is a collaboration between the Public School Forum and the Burroughs Wellcome Fund

Acknowledgements

The Public School Forum wants to extend its thanks to the many people and groups, ranging from the NCAE to the Governor's staff to the Education: Everybody's Business Coalition, that have examined this issue. A special thanks goes to the staff of the Department of Public Instruction which has been gathering input and convening brainstorming sessions around issues related to low-performing schools.

Special appreciation also goes to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Ward who made numerous suggestions that were incorporated into this document.

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MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Unmasking Student Performance Data

One of the consequences of the state's ABCs accountability plan has been the "unmasking" of student performance data. Previously, many of our chronic student performance problems were largely hidden because test scores were reported in the aggregate – instead of being able to know how well students in one building were performing, we could only see how well students across entire school systems were performing.

The new ABCs model, which reports student performance data by school building, has made it impossible to ignore the enormous gap between students in high-performing schools and their counterparts in low-performing schools. It also makes it impossible to ignore the fact that schools are doing least well with the

TOP & BOTTOM ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

based on % of students scoring at or above grade level 1997 ABCs results

BOTTOM FIVE SCHOOLS (PK-5)

School	# of Students	% Students Scoring At/Above Grade Level	% Students on Free/Reduced Lunch
WG Pearson	367	26.6%	97.7%
Coker-Wimberly	401	26.9%	83.7%
Princeville Mont	298	16.7%	84.9%
Poe	258	31.8%	45.4%
Carver Heights	660	32.9%	98.7%

TOP FIVE SCHOOLS (PK-5)

School	# of Students	% Students Scoring At/Above Grade Level	% Students on Free/Reduced Lunch
Barringer Academic Ctr	464	96.7%	4.3%
McKee Road	930	91.0%	10.2%
Villa Heights	248	95.7%	24.4%
Dawson	183	94.8%	93.8%
Walnut	82	90.7%	1.2%

state's neediest students – those from low-income homes, those who tend to be clustered in communities with low educational levels and high unemployment rates.

While policymakers anticipated that the ABCs program would uncover problems, it would have been difficult to predict the scope. Fully 122 elementary and middle schools have been designated "low performing." The performance composite of students in those buildings hovers around 40.9%, meaning that substantially less than one-half of the students are performing at, or above, grade level.

The ABCs Intervention Model

Included in the legislation that launched the ABCs plan was an intervention, or assistance, model. The 1996 legislation calls for the State Board of Education to send intervention teams into the state's lowest performing schools and makes it possible to remove the school principals. The 1997 legislation also mandates testing of teachers in low-performing schools. Now that the state has had nearly one-year's experience working with low-performing schools, it is becoming clear that mandating consequences is one thing; solving the problem of low-performing schools is quite another.

What follows is an examination of some of the critical accountability issues now brought to the fore. This *Policy Brief* is focusing on this issue because it is generating more and more concern among policymakers and educators. The issue is made even more urgent as a result of the state's nearly 400 high schools coming on line this year with the newly adopted high school testing model. In all probability, next year's list of low-performing schools will include dozens of high schools.

In considering the complex issues related to low-performing schools, four emerge as fundamental to the success or failure of state-driven intervention efforts:

Issue One: The philosophy and roles of intervention teams

Issue Two: The use of – or need for – additional resources

Issue Three: The challenge of attracting & retaining competent teachers in low-performing schools

Issue Four: The need to go beyond traditional responses

Issue 1: THE PHILOSOPHY AND ROLE OF INTERVENTION TEAMS

The broad intervention strategies typically fall into one of two categories. Category One is a "get tough" philosophy predicated on the assumption that the leadership, the staff, or both, in low-performing schools are not performing well and need either to "shape up" or "move out." Category Two strategies focus more on "capacity building." They presume that faculties of low-performing schools need to sharpen their teaching skills, while focusing their instruction on clearer goals and that principals need to provide far more leadership and vision.

Which of these strategies is employed typically depends on the language of the legislation mandating intervention. In North Carolina, legislation was distinctly on the "get tough" side of the ledger. It specified that:

- Teachers in low-performing schools would be tested.
- Principals not up to the job could be removed.
- Intervention teams would be assigned to low-performing schools.

In practice, the NC intervention teams also employ Category Two, capacity building, strategies. The teams are working with faculties to align curriculum goals and teaching practices, and with individual teachers to improve classroom practices; they are attempting to mold more effective faculty teams.

The chief criticism of the current intervention efforts in North Carolina is that they touch so few of the 122 low-performing schools. Currently, five-person teams are assigned to only 15 schools. Those schools are receiving full-time attention. An additional 40 of the schools have received some attention, but the remaining schools are largely untouched.

Limiting the capacity of intervention teams is the labor intensive nature of intervention strategies. Because of employment law, the process of documenting ineffective teachers and principals is laborious and time consuming. Thus, the first half of the school year is spent observing and documenting individual performance of faculty members. In the meantime, thousands of teachers in other low-performing schools are receiving no attention from the state.

One of the "get tough" portions of the intervention legislation, mandated teacher testing, is already creating concerns. The state spent months securing a test that can be administered to teachers in low-performing schools. Most companies and states which have developed teacher tests were unwilling to let their tests be used for evaluative purposes. The cost of the test which will be used this spring is high – already leading some to question whether the same funds could be used with better effect.

Similar testing programs previously attempted in Georgia, Arkansas, and Texas were dropped because of litigation and teacher opposition. The same opposition exists in North Carolina. The test measures whether teachers have mastered basic language and mathematics; it does not purport to measure whether someone is a competent or incompetent teacher.

Further, the test is only being administered in the 15 schools which have been assigned intervention teams. Teachers in the other 107 low-performing schools will not be tested. Thus, of the roughly 3,600 teachers in low-performing schools, only the 403 in the 15 lowest performing schools will be tested.

Policy Alternatives

- Assign only one or two intervention team members to a limited number of schools and reassign the rest to work with three to five schools each.
- Divert money currently spent in the 15 schools to bring together teams of teachers and principals from all low-performing schools for intensive training sessions in the summer months. Reinforce that training with up to 20 or 25 days of consulting during the school year.
- Borrow from South Carolina's intervention strategy and create, as South Carolina has, a team of consultants to work with designated schools. Or, marshal the resources of the state's college and university teacher training programs, educational associations, businesses committed to school improvement, and staff from high-performing schools to create a pool of resources for low-performing schools.
- Challenge all private and public college and university schools of education to 'adopt' one low-performing school, potentially bringing badly needed assistance to over 40 low-performing schools.
- Make a clear delineation between intervention team members whose job it is to evaluate personnel and those whose job it is to coach and train.
- Bring together principals and assistant principals of low-performing schools two or three times a year to expose them to practices that are working in high-performing schools.
- Encourage counties to assemble their own intervention or assistance teams before intervention is necessary.
- In the matter of teacher testing, consider the use of student performance data that would make it possible to distinguish between effective and ineffective teachers. Using student performance data to make judgments about the quality of individual teachers has been skirted for some time as a result of intense opposition by teacher groups; however, the state's data collection system has now reached a point where it is possible to measure individual student performance over time, enabling intervention teams to pinpoint differences among teaching outcomes. Such a move would enable intervention teams to make distinctions between teachers in low-performing schools. Instead of today's teacher testing approach which some describe as "presuming teachers are guilty until proven innocent," teachers who have demonstrated their ability to increase student performance would not be required to take tests.

The question for policymakers is whether it is possible to ask intervention teams to be both "cop" and "coach." Currently, they are attempting to be both.

Setting aside the difficulty of wearing two hats, the larger questions revolve around volume and philosophy. Can intervention teams be employed in such a way that they are capable of strengthening scores of schools, not a handful of schools? With that, could the state get more productivity out of an approach that presumes all schools could be more successful if provided with outside leadership and training; or, is improvement first dependent on weeding out those who are not up to the task?

Issue 2: THE USE OF – OR NEED FOR – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Many counties with low-performing schools have already responded by allocating additional resources. Several have created in-house assistance teams that are working with low-performing schools. In Robeson County, low-performing schools have been given additional resources of roughly $20,000 each. In Wake County, through a partnership between the school system and the Wake Educational Partnership, after-school instruction is available to over 60 young people through a contract with Sylvan Learning, a private educational company.

These examples raise the question of the state's role in building the capacity of low-performing schools, as well as what expenditures of funds are most likely to make an impact. Research on successful schools would indicate that there are investments that could make a difference. For instance:

- Expenditures of funds that would provide students additional instruction in after-school programs, Saturday schools or summer schools
- Dramatic reductions in class size
- Investments in staff training and development
- Course load or preparation reductions for teachers creating time during the day for teacher planning and preparation
- Computer technology, especially that for remediation in basic subjects

If there is an Achilles Heel in accountability programs across the country, it is that while states are ratcheting up accountability expectations, most have done little, if anything, to build the capacity of schools and educators. It is a classic case of asking the same people to meet new goals under the same conditions. That is a Herculean expectation for any school, but it may prove to be wishful thinking in schools facing the most extreme demographic challenges.

THE ESTIMATED COST OF REDUCING CLASS SIZE

1985/86-1996/97 Cost figures not adjusted to 1998 dollars

Fiscal Year	Appropriation	Classes Reduced	Add'l Teachers Needed Due to Approp.	Add'l Teachers Needed Due to Stud. Pop. Growth*	Annual Cost	Cumulative Cost
'85/86	$32,936,773	Gr. 7-9	1,357	n/a	$32,936,773	$32,936,773
'86/87	$4,255,021	Gr. 9	153	n/a	$44,258,141	$77,194,914
'87/88	$7,232,505	Gr. 10-12	257	n/a	$53,379,887	$130,574,801
'88/89	none	none	0	n/a	$55,973,278	$186,548,079
'89/90	none	none	0	1	$60,987,354	$247,535,433
'90/91	none	none	0	14	$64,593,259	$312,128,692
'91/92	none	none	0	27	$64,024,273	$376,152,965
'92/93	none	none	0	19	$66,717,851	$442,870,816
'93/94	none	none	0	24	$68,517,316	$511,388,132
'94/95	$17,048,512	Kinderg.	496	28	$88,976,522	$600,364,654
'95/96	$18,577,269	Gr. 1	513	48	$110,244,770	$710,609,424
'96/97	$18,442,095	Gr. 2	505	93	$136,272,711	$846,882,135

*Note: figure does not reflect the total number of new teachers required to meet student population growth, it only includes those needed due to the lower class size ratios.

Source: for Appropriations, Fiscal Research Div., General Assembly; for Avg. Teacher Cost and ADM Growth, School Business Services, NC DPI

The total cost of increasing the number of teachers due to reducing class size in public schools is approximately $847 million over a twelve school-year period. It should be noted that the $847 million figure is only the estimated total impact of salaries and benefits of new teachers required by class size reduction actions. Since it is difficult to deduce the number and cost of additional classrooms necessitated by class size reductions, the analysis above does not take into account the average cost per new classroom in 1997/98 ($126,350). Presuming that new classrooms were required for all 3,535 new teaching positions created for class size reductions, the cost would be an additional $447 million.

Barriers to Strategic Investments

Two things stand in the way of making strategic investments in schools facing the stiffest challenges. First, the list of funding demands facing policymakers is formidable. According to the Department of Public Instruction's fiscal staff, to simply fund the multi-year salary commitments made in the Excellent Schools Act will take roughly $240 million

new dollars per year. To meet the projected student enrollment growth of 20,000 per year will take an additional $100 million.

The second barrier to strategic investments is the most difficult to overcome. Historically, education funding is made on a "one for all and all for one" basis. If class size is reduced, it is reduced in every school. If computers are provided to schools, the same ratio of computers is provided to all schools.

In recent years, the only major deviation from a "one for all" funding system was the creation of a supplemental fund to provide additional resources to low wealth and small schools. That fund, however, makes up an almost insignificant proportion of the total school budget.

It is politically difficult to single out one category of schools for what could be termed "special" treatment. The result is that while the state makes progress in areas like class size reduction, it is painfully incremental and slow.

The charts below illustrate the impact of the state's philosophy of funding schools in the same way. The State Board has a long term goal of reducing class size. Since 1983, the State Board has requested multiple class size reductions and North Carolina has invested an estimated $847 million in class size reductions; however, research would suggest that the impact of the investment is negligible. Numerous studies find that until class sizes are lowered to 15-18, or fewer, there is virtually no gain in student performance. Fifteen years and $847 million later, North Carolina class sizes are nowhere near that level.

Policy Alternatives

In contrast to the class size example of funding schools in a "one for all, all for one" way, what could the state accomplish if it were to make strategic investments in low-performing schools? In the area of class size reductions, if the state adopted as a priority, reducing class sizes to 15 in low-performing elementary schools, it would be looking at investments in 87 of the 2,016 public school buildings, or less than five percent of the buildings in the state. Presuming that today's class size in low-performing elementary schools is, on average, roughly 24 students, a strategic investment of $26.9 million (the cost of an additional 692 teachers) would result in a class size ratio in all 87 low-performing elementary schools of one teacher to 15 students – the level at which research says measurable improvement would be probable.

If strategic investments in low-performing schools were to become a new funding strategy, the following would be possible:

- Reduce class size in all low-performing elementary buildings to 15-18 students per class.
- Provide the equivalent of eleven months of employment to one-fourth of the teachers in low-performing schools; the additional time that such an appropriation would provide could go toward after school, Saturday

AN "ALL FOR ONE & ONE FOR ALL" INVESTMENT

Reducing Class Size by 3 in all second grades

THE NEED FOR MORE TEACHERS

Class Size	# of Students 96-97 data	# of Teachers Needed
23	101,646	4,419
20	101,646	5,082

THE COSTS

Teacher Costs	$25,807,275
Classroom Costs	$83,770,050
Total	$109,557,325

A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT

Reducing Class Size to 15 in all 87 Low-performing (PK-5)

THE NEED FOR MORE TEACHERS

Class Size	# of Students	# of Teachers Needed
24	27,642	1, 153
15	27,642	1,844

THE COSTS

Teacher Costs	$26,936,100
Classroom Costs	$87,380,501
Total	$114,316,601

Source: NC DPI

The chart (above left) shows that if class size in all second grades was lowered from 23 to 20, approximately 663 additional teachers at $38,925 each, and with an average cost for a second grade classroom of $126,350, the total estimated cost increase for the class reduction in all second grades would be $109,577,325. The chart (above right) shows a strategic investment targeted at low-performing schools. If class size is reduced to 15 in all 87 low-performing elementary (PK-5) schools, 692 extra teachers will be required. Presuming a teacher cost of $38,925 and an average cost of a new classroom as $126,350, the total estimated cost increase for the class size reduction would be $114,316,601.

or summer instruction. As an example, there are approximately 3,600 teachers in today's 122 low-performing elementary and middle schools. If one-fourth of those teachers were employed for an extra month of employment it would mean that low-performing schools would have 18,000 extra instructional days available at a cost of only $3.5 million. (Today's average total teacher cost – salary and benefits – is $38,925. Taking 1/10th of that average and multiplying it by 900 teachers leads to the $3.5 million cost estimate.)

- Provide more technology in the classes and homes of low-performing students.
- Provide intensive training to teams of teachers and administrators from all low-performing schools during the summer and provide consulting follow-up through the school year.
- Focus discretionary federal dollars on the needs of low-performing schools. Goals 2000 funding, for instance, could be targeted to stimulating new approaches to the needs of low-performing students.

Given the distribution of low-performing schools, such a funding approach might be politically possible. Low-performing schools are not just in certain systems. They are found in isolated rural areas; they are found in the heart of major cities like Charlotte or Raleigh. Most school systems have one or more low-performing schools; thus, strategic investments would be widely spread across North Carolina. Because of that, policymakers would not be charged with funding policies that only benefit certain counties; instead, they would be responding to a widespread problem.

The question for policymakers is whether the state will continue an incremental, across-the-board, funding policy that makes it difficult to ever test whether research-based answers would work in schools; or, should the state become more strategic about its use of money?

Issue 3: THE CHALLENGE: ATTRACTING – & RETAINING – COMPETENT FACULTY

When schools were designated as "low performing," concerns were voiced about the impact on teacher recruitment and retention. Since that time, it has become clear that those concerns are well founded.

Low-performing schools, be they in rural North Carolina or inner-cities, are frequently not desirable places in which to work. In rural areas, low-performing schools are often located in communities that have few housing, shopping or recreational amenities – not to mention some of the lowest county salary supplements in the state. In urban areas, they are frequently located in areas in which safety is an issue.

Policy Alternatives

As the issue gains attention, some are asking if salaries or retirement incentives would solve the problem. Others argue that such approaches would discriminate against existing teachers. Still others contend it would be counterproductive to create retirement incentives that would only accelerate the departure of qualified teachers from the field.

One possibility is to ease restrictions that prevent retired teachers from teaching full or part-time while drawing state retirement benefits. If retired teachers could teach in low-performing schools and continue to draw retirement benefits while being paid for teaching service, it could create a powerful incentive to draw experienced teachers back into schools.

Are there other incentives that could be offered? Would, for instance, teachers find the possibility of teaching in schools with dramatically lower class sizes motivating? Would they be drawn to a school that issued technology to all students and teachers?

An interesting intra-school system approach has been suggested that could be an alternative in large school systems. If a county announced that all existing staff in a

low-performing school would have to reapply for their jobs if they wanted to remain and proceed to assemble a new staff and leadership team, would teams of teachers and administrators find the challenge of turning around a low-performing school motivating? Large counties could insure that teachers not selected to return to low-performing schools would be guaranteed other jobs. This approach could change the culture of low-performing schools overnight. Combining it with other incentives such as technology and reduced class sizes could provide a powerful recruiting incentive to risk-taking educators motivated by the challenge of proving that a low-performing school could change.

Last, an additional month of employment could provide both a financial incentive to teachers and arm schools with the capability of offering far more instruction to students in low-performing schools.

Issue 4: THE NEED TO GO BEYOND TRADITIONAL RESPONSES

Low-performing schools tend to differ in one fundamental way from high-performing schools. For the most part, their student population is comprised of young people whose needs have historically not been met by public schools. The overwhelming majority of low-performing students qualify for free and reduced lunch, a reliable proxy for measuring whether they are growing up in poverty. They frequently live in areas where unemployment is high, where few adults have excelled in schools, where teenage birth rates are high, and where single-family homes are not uncommon.

New research coming out of UNC's School of Social Work has found that when children are confronted with high numbers of problems like poor nutrition, inadequate health care, unsafe neighborhoods or drug usage in their homes, school personnel, even highly qualified personnel are unlikely to lead troubled young people to success in schools.

A Call For A Non-traditional Response

Such research would argue for non-traditional responses to the needs of many low-performing schools. If the state were to truly marshal its resources, could it:

- Surround low-performing schools with teams of specialists accustomed to dealing with the array of problems having an impact on young people and families in need?
- Assemble teams of community and economic development specialists to focus on the needs of communities surrounding low-performing schools?
- Consider arrangements with community colleges that would frame incentive programs for young people in low-performing schools who could demonstrate command of basic language and math skills. If such programs were to enable young people to transition into community college work before the end of the senior year in high school, could they become a magnet that would lead low-performing young people to gain more education and job training?
- Enlist nonprofit organizations, like Communities in Schools, to work with intervention teams in low-performing schools?
- Experiment with private educational providers like Sylvan Learning (already being used by some public schools), which excels in providing remedial education, and LightSpan (also in use in some public schools), which trains low-performing students and parents how to use educational technology which is then placed in their homes?
- Harness the community colleges' long distance learning network to bring high quality staff development to teachers throughout the state?

Whatever the strategies employed, the problems confronting low-performing schools are not simply within the walls of schools. The problems extend into the communities and homes of youngsters living in the communities that surround low-performing schools. Intervention strategies that turn a blind eye toward the connection between schools and communities are unlikely to do more than show marginal improvement over the long haul.

IN SUMMARY

While the state's current intervention teams are working diligently to show measurable progress in the state's lowest performing schools, the scope of the problem is such that their efforts could amount to little.

For North Carolina, the question is how can the state become a full partner in school improvement. While there have been notable examples of schools performing well against all odds, the preponderance of the state's 122 low-performing schools are confronting issues related to poverty, inadequate parental support, and histories of difficulties in attracting and retaining top-notch educators. Are there policy responses that could make it possible for these schools to have a far greater chance of meeting today's new demands?

Without such alternatives, there is a high likelihood that the state will be confronted with larger and larger numbers of low-performing schools in the years ahead.

The Forum believes the state's response to low-performing schools may well determine the long-term success or failure of the ABCs initiative. The Forum will continue both to monitor steps being taken to bolster student performance in these schools and to work with the Department of Public Instruction, education associations, and policymakers in an effort to find ways to increase the likelihood that all schools will succeed in the years ahead.